Talwst aka Curtis Santiago is a Toronto-based artist. With his miniature jewelry box sculptures, he explores the narrative of art history by inserting elements of contrasting cultures. His first international solo exhibition, “Death of Swag,' took place in 2012 at Fuse Gallery in New York City. Since then, he’s exhibited in Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton and Paris. His continuing work with the Art Gallery of Ontario includes his position as Artistic Director and Co-Curator for the 2015 Massive Gala. His show “The History of Touches” is at Toronto’s Angell Gallery October 16-November 14, 2015. “A Constellation” opens at Harlem’s Studio Museum on November 12th-March 6th.
“I don’t believe in a system for making art. That’s the last thing I want. For a lot of my life, I was a pop singer. It was all about verses, bridges, choruses. Now, I don’t want to create based on a formula. I go through my box of collage materials that I’ve been collecting for eight years or look at books for references or sometimes it starts out with a colour, a shape and sitting with that for awhile. Thinking and figuring out the story.

I understand the stories that I’m telling, but I still don’t understand why I’m making them in these tiny boxes. I don’t want to make anything that’s not a jewelry box. It can’t be one that jewelry’s stored in. It has to be the box that was given as a gift. I don’t know why that’s my obsession.

It started when a guy threw me a ring box. He said, ‘I want to see what you can do with this.’ I was super broke and only had a palette with chunks of dried paint. I peeled the paint off and made a beach scene with a girl coming out at the water.

I’m a big believer in casting my intent. When I was at the Met, I saw all walks of life standing in front of a Van Gogh painting and thought, ‘This is the type of art I want to make.’ The type of art where you don’t have to read Art Forum to understand it, but if you read it, there’s also something for you. With that first ring box, no matter who I showed it to, the reaction was similar to what I saw at the Met. I realized that I had the medium so the next thing I needed was the technique. I want to push my skills forward so that one day they’re in the Whitney and MoMA. That box let me know that if I pursue this, I’ll get there.”
“Right now, I have fifteen boxes on the go and there’s no hesitation. I have a cot in my studio but I’ve been a psycho and passing out in this chair. When I woke up, my hands were numb because I was sleeping in the chair. Tonight I’ll go home. When I was travelling in Paris, Venice and New York, I was constantly out walking and dancing. It’s different to be back in the studio and sitting for hours.

I’ve been looking at French paintings in art history and poking fun based on situations that happened to me in Paris. I was pulled out of a cab by police officers in the middle of the afternoon. They told me that I look suspicious and needed to search my pockets. They asked me if I had any dangerous weapons on me. Why would I have dangerous weapons on me? I’m a tourist.

There’s a dark, seedier side to Paris. It will look gorgeous all around you, but then you’ll notice that there’s a gypsy family in the middle of a traffic circle. That dynamic is what I’m trying to capture.

My work ethic comes from my parents. They moved from Trinidad and Tobago to Fort McMurray, Alberta. My mom was 18 years old and pregnant with her first child. My dad worked in the oil sands. They had to survive. They would say, ‘We’re in a country where you don’t look like everybody else. You’ll often have to work twice as hard to open certain doors.’ My dad is very good at what he does but it took him a long time to move up. He’d open up his lunchbox and there’d be a note from the KKK. You’re dealing with Alberta, small-minded construction dudes out in a work camp and you’re one of the only black guys and you’re killing it. That’s hard for a lot of people. I learned that it’s always going to be a grind, especially if you choose an alternative path like art.

I’m a 1980’s football player when I think about my art and my practice. There’s this football player Ronnie Lott and before a game, he jammed his finger so badly that he knew he wasn’t able to play. So, he cut his finger off, taped it up and stuffed his glove to make it look like there was a finger. He played the game like that. Whatever the circumstance is, I have to be able to work through it. I love the challenge of that.”